

# 1 INTRODUCTION: A STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN FOR THE FUTURE OF NORTH ADAMS

*The city of North Adams is a small city with all of the ingredients a community could ask for:*

- *A world-renowned arts venue in MASS MoCA, a first rate college in MCLA, and hospital, together offering jobs and urban-level arts, culture and health care services;*
- *A scenic setting with open space amenities on all sides and a city with tons of character thanks in part to its historic downtown and surrounding historic districts, including a number of mill reuse projects;*
- *A community of people who love the city and are deeply committed to making sure it succeeds, with a number of active groups investing their own time, money and resources in urban improvement and economic catalyst projects along the river and in downtown;*
- *Leadership with a commitment to hearing and championing fresh ideas and with the energy to make it all happen.*

*Yet the city has faced, and currently grapples with, a number of challenges. This process, and resulting document, reflects the combined input and ideas from a wide array of stakeholders, best practice research, and community dialogue about how to move the city forward to make all these pieces gel and achieve their potential.*

## AN INITIATIVE BEGINS

In 2010, the city of North Adams, under the new leadership of Mayor Richard Alcombright, then in his first term and the first new Mayor the city had had in nearly 30 years, began a process to think critically about where the city was, where residents and businesses wanted it to go in the future, and what it would take to get there. In other words: a plan. The city's last comprehensive plan had been adopted in 1971 and, as a document with a 10-year shelf life, was woefully out of date.

The Mayor, Office of Community Development, and the City's Community and Economic Development Advisory Board (CEDAB), which advises the City's annual Community Development Block Grant process and investments, applied for a grant from Berkshire Regional Planning Commission to assess the role a plan could play in charting a fresh course for the city's future. This process led the group to conclude that a plan would be a valuable tool to help organize and align investments and activities by the City but also private and non-profit partners, to maximize benefits to the community.

In 2010, the City hired Berkshire Regional Planning Commission to continue their work and develop a new comprehensive plan. The BRPC had, at that same time, been awarded a HUD Sustainable Communities Planning Grant to create a new long-range plan for the region. The City decided to align their process with that of the new regional plan to enable them to maximize the benefits of analysis and mapping that would be done through that effort for the City's plan and to also ensure that there was consistency between the two plans. This means the city will be well positioned to capture benefits from initiatives done regionally because they already understand what is called for and how those regional ideas or priorities apply locally.



### Related Maps

Map 1: Location and Context

*Located in Appendix C*



*Windsor Lake, and surrounding parkland, is a popular recreation destination right next to some of the city's core neighborhoods and just a few miles from downtown. The park is the site for an outdoor concert series in summer as well as outdoor yoga classes.*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A PLAN

Just as any well-run business has a business plan, so must a city. A city is a business with a multi-million dollar budget, hundreds of employees, and “shareholders” in each and every resident. Having a plan in place accomplishes a number of things:

- Provides a vehicle through which the city can step back and take an inventory of its assets and challenges to then chart a smart strategy for how to achieve its goals.
- Engages the citizenry in setting those goals through an open and inclusive process where all voices are heard and considered rather than closed-door decision-making by a few.
- Expresses a vision and strategies in a document that is available for all, which serves as a communication tool to current and future residents and businesses as well as potential funders and investors.
- Catalyzes and supports community initiatives to bring more people, organizations and resources together to help accomplish the shared vision for the city as expressed in the plan.
- Ensures accountability to residents and businesses in its pursuit of plan strategies and reporting progress over time.

## THE PLANNING PROCESS

### THE STEERING COMMITTEE

A steering committee of 16 people met every 1-2 months throughout the planning process to guide and shape the plan. This group included current and retired educators, the Planning Board, City Council, municipal staff, and local business, economic development, outdoor, river restoration, health and neighborhood representatives. Their meetings involved a mix of group exercises, detailed data presentations, and careful review and thoughtful discussion of draft plan content.



*(Back row, from left) Amanda Chilson, Mike Nuvallie, Donald Pecor, Mayor Alcombright, Joanne DeRose, Steve Green (front row, from left) Alan Marden, Mackenzie Greer, and Judith Grinnell. Absent from photo: John Greenbush, Paul Hopkins, Glenn Maloney, Brian Miksic, Jonathan Secor, Jay Walsh, and David Willette.*

### STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

At the start of the process, BRPC worked with City staff to identify a list of stakeholders representing different agencies, businesses, services, and interests in the region. This included the senior center, hospital, airport, industrial park Commission, building inspector, North Adams Housing Authority, River Revival, Partnership for North Adams, MCLA, MASS MoCA, and more. This input helped to quickly focus the planning effort and identify a set of draft plan priorities which were then taken to the public and the vision workshop for review and discussion.

### PUBLIC WORKSHOPS AND OPEN HOUSES

Broad public involvement was a fundamental underpinning of the whole plan. Given that the community had not engaged in this type of civic dialogue on this scale in anyone's memory, it took a while to gain the trust and momentum for more and more new faces to join the conversation. We did, however, get there by using a variety of tools and allowing people to see their ideas appear in the plan as a result. They are summarized, below, in the order they occurred.

## Vision

### *Youth Visioning Exercise*

BRPC worked with the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition and the Mayor's Youth Council to conduct a photo visioning exercise with the teens taking pictures of what they like, would like to see change, and would like to see added to their community. Staff then met with the youth to discuss their findings and capture their input in writing as well. The same exercise was also completed by the steering committee.

### *Visioning Workshop*

The first workshop that was held provided an overview of the plan and initiated discussions on people's visions for the future of the city. This was a three-part event. First, an open house with posters of data and maps on the topics to be covered in the plan displayed at the edges of the room. Second, there was a formal presentation with a question and answer period. Finally, attendees broke into small groups and discussed their vision for the city and priorities for the plan to address.

## Historic Preservation

### *Historic Preservation Workshop*

A historic preservation workshop was held at the public library where there was a brief presentation before attendees broke into four small groups to discuss historic districts, landscapes, and neighborhoods, and cultural assets. This input was then used to help identify goals and policies in the plan.

## Economic Development

### *Local Business Forums*

High-volume, condensed input sessions were facilitated over a continental breakfast at both The Porches Inn (all of northern Berkshire) and Gallery 51 (North Adams only) to hear from local businesses what they need to thrive. This included labor, commercial space, business support services, municipal permitting and regulations, financial tools and services, and more. The results of these forums are contained in the appendix to this plan.

### *Economy Workshop and Open House*

A public workshop was held on the economy of the city, including an overview of small business input received at the forums. The discussion and exercises were broken down into four basic categories: the city overall, and what should happen in downtown, Route 8 Corridor, and Route 2 Corridor. Draft goals were presented for reaction as well as specific map-based questions about priority development sites, desired future uses, and needed tools or regulatory changes.

### *Downtown Walkability Study*

BRPC teamed with a Williams College Center for Environmental Studies community planning class to conduct a walkability audit of the downtown and three surrounding neighborhoods. The students were trained in how to conduct a walkability audit to learn what to look for and document in the pedestrian environment that may impede safe pedestrian travel such as cars parked on sidewalks or faded crosswalks. They then marked issues on maps and conducted pedestrian street surveys to gather user input from residents. These findings and recommendations were presented at a meeting in the public library and are now with the City to guide specific strategy development. Some are also incorporated in the downtown and infrastructure and services recommendations.



## Open Space and Recreation

### Park Level of Service Study

BRPC teamed with a Williams College Center for Environmental Studies community planning class to conduct an assessment of how well all parts of the city were served by current parks. The goal was to better understand the geography of current parks to see if there were in essence “gaps” in service where neighborhoods or sections of neighborhoods have no park within a certain distance of them. The distances used varied by the type of park – a small playground, sometimes called a “tot lot” having the smallest draw area and major recreation amenities like the skating rink or Alcombright Athletic Complex, having much larger draw areas. The students made some recommendations on potential new parks to fill service gaps as well as some potential improvements that could enhance amenities and use of current parks. These recommendations informed policy but are also intended to help inform the City’s updated Open Space and Recreation Plan.

## Open Space and Recreation Workshop

An open house style workshop was held on Main Street to allow people to come through the display as their schedule allowed and the storefront space made it easy to capture street traffic and people who might not come to a formal two-hour workshop. There were multiple displays including a set seeking detailed input on desired improvements to existing parks as well as new parks. River Revival was there with their river greenway concept diagrams to gather input. Northern Berkshire Community Coalition (nbCC) was on hand via their Mass In Motion program to present draft urban walking loop ideas. A skate park survey and information poster was on display with the goal of gathering votes on a preferred site. Finally, maps and goals for parks and recreation, including bike path extension and connections to current trails were available for review and interactive comment.



*The use of a Main Street storefront space allowed for a comfortable, casual space for people to interact with the posters and each other, spending as little or as much time as they liked during the 2-hour window.*

## Local Food and Health

### *Keep Farming Surveys*

A regional Keep Berkshires Farming initiative was part of the regional planning process, but broke down the county into groupings of communities with northern Berkshire as one group. There was strong participation from North Adams residents on that volunteer working group and much of the work and meetings were conducted in the city. This included a number of surveys of farms, restaurants, schools and institutions, food banks and community meal sites. The findings helped inform the goals and strategies in this plan.

### *Food Fest Outdoor Open House*

The draft goals and strategies for local food and health were displayed at Food Fest in summer 2013 for attendees to review and comment as they worked their way through the different food booths. Comments received helped refine the draft goals.

## Neighborhood Meetings

### *Neighborhood Surveys*

At the start of the planning process, the city did not have a map of any neighborhoods. A principal goal was therefore to try to define boundaries against which we could organize strategies and outreach. The first step was to work with the nbCC and a long time city resident and community advocate to drive around the city with maps and try to delineate where one neighborhood stopped and another began. This resulted in 13 neighborhoods, which were then displayed at events over the summer (e.g., Windsor Lake Concert, Steeplecats baseball game) to gain public reaction and input. A survey was also conducted to gain input on neighborhood priorities.

### *Four Neighborhood Meetings*

Once we felt comfortable with the neighborhood boundaries, BRPC worked with the nbCC neighborhood program coordinator to promote and co-host four neighborhood meetings, organizing the 13 neighborhoods into four groups. These open house pizza party meetings were intentionally social but also gathered input from residents on what they liked best about their neighborhoods, ideas for how to see to make the neighborhood even better, and any trouble spots that they'd like to see addressed.

### *Citywide Meeting*

The cumulative input from the four neighborhood meetings was compiled and turned into draft goals and strategies for the plan. A citywide meeting was then held to display this content for reaction.



*The final citywide workshop on housing and neighborhoods included a presentation followed by an open house where people could view the policies that emerged from the four prior neighborhood meetings.*

## Land Use, Infrastructure and Services

### *Land Use, Infrastructure and Services Workshop*

A public open house was held at the public library to provide a venue for people to review and comment on draft goals and policies for land use and infrastructure and services. A separate display and worksheet were also available for people to consider land use plan choices for crafting a future land use plan.

### Public Hearing

To be added – scheduled for Late April.

## FROM KEY PRIORITIES TO STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

As described in the section above, community visioning exercises and stakeholder interviews were where the plan began. From those early conversations, combined with a comprehensive review of data, trends, and conditions in the city, there emerged a set of 10 key priorities – what the city hopes the plan will address. While the full planning priorities summary is in the appendix, the key thoughts are summarized below.

### OVERARCHING THEMES OR VALUES

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#### **Retain Core Community Values in The Face of Change**

North Adams, like many Berkshire communities, has a long history of residents with strong ties to and pride in their city. While the pace of change in the county as a whole has been slow, the city has experienced a steady population decline over the past decades. This population decline, however, does not mean that the population hasn't seen new residents move to the area. Recent years have seen an influx of new residents from outside of the area with new ideas and perspectives on the city. The city wants to ensure that old-timers and transplants each have a place at the table to successfully build a new future without losing the rich history and community character valued by residents.

#### **Rebrand The City**

The city is in a period of rebirth but faces an uphill battle against a decades-old image as a “run-down mill town.” The vision developed through the plan will serve as the basis for communicating this new identity. As the vision is a first step in the planning process, rebranding actions will be set out and move towards implementation in the next several months.





*The downtown is very much the heart of the city. Recent streetscape, lighting and signage have helped beautify the downtown. While many storefronts once sat vacant, the city has seen vacancy rates drop and new businesses come in, including on the side streets on the north side of Main Street.*

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

*The Economic Development chapter of the plan contains the goals and actions for building a strong economy in the city. This includes actions addressing the planning priorities raised at the start of the planning process:*

### **Address Conditions That Make Employer and Employee Recruitment and Retention Challenging**

Major employers and attractions in the city, including MASS MoCA and MCLA note that blighted conditions throughout the city are a major obstacle to student, visitor, and employee attraction and retention. The visual impact of blighted and condemned buildings upon entry to the city, concrete flood chutes and chain link fencing blocking off the river, vacant storefronts in the Downtown, and the lack of aesthetic and other pedestrian and bike amenities present marketing challenges. Housing conditions and school quality were also discussed as other conditions that influence prospective student, business, and employee decision-making. The plan identifies numerous strategies for combating these conditions and creating attractive gateways, corridors and spaces throughout the city.

### **Facilitate Economic Growth and Transition**

A common storyline in discussing North Adams is one of economic decline tied to the loss of major manufacturing employers. The addition of MASS MoCA in 1999 drew a mark on that timeline and signaled brighter days ahead linked to new tourism and creative economy activity. The next big wave of positive change occurred when North Adams State College, rebranded in 1997 as Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, began to gain momentum and recognition as a top public liberal arts college in the country. The City is now working to generate the third wave by investing public dollars to leverage private investment in projects like the Greylock Market, collaborative relationships with local and regional business and economic development groups, targeting investments in prioritized economic corridors and the downtown, and a comprehensive economic strategy as contained in this plan.



*North Adams is a compact city built in a river valley surrounded on all sides by state lands and mountains, including Mount Greylock, the state's highest peak and the largest recreation draw in the region.*

## OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

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*The Open Space and Recreation policy chapter contains the goals and action steps the City plans to take to maintain and add recreation amenities for residents and visitors to enjoy. The actions focus on how open space and recreation assets support a high quality of life in the city, healthy lifestyles, and economic development. This includes actions addressing the planning priorities raised at the start of the planning process:*

### **Maintain High Quality Recreation Options**

The city has many park and open space offerings including regional recreation destinations like Noel Field, the Alcombright Athletic Complex and the Peter W. Foote Vietnam Veterans Memorial Skating Rink as well as smaller neighborhood and pocket parks. In addition, the city has been working to plan for and implement a skateboard park to provide another option for northern Berkshire youth. Maintaining the equipment and grounds at facilities, however, is a challenge given limited fiscal resources.

### **Leverage Presence of Open Space and Wild Lands**

In addition to in-city parks, there are also open lands on all sides for residents and visitors to enjoy. The high quality of life amenities offered in the city – livable scale, interesting historic architecture, nearby colleges, and traditional downtown – are all further enhanced by the fact that the city is surrounded by vast areas of open space with two significant long-distance trail routes running through. There is a great opportunity to further enhance and “package” these assets as a year-round draw for visitors and residents. Beyond marketing, this also entails structural ways of highlighting the city’s natural assets through river enhancements, trail connections, and maps and signage. The rerouting of traffic from Mount Greylock into the downtown is a key opportunity for which the downtown can start now to prepare.

### **Offer Recreation Options for All Ages**

Seniors today enjoy active retirements and the city needs to be prepared to offer enough recreation options to meet the needs of different ages and abilities. On the other side of the spectrum, youth are the future of the city and having quality and diverse options for them is important to kids and their parents.





*Events, such as the Eagle Street Beach Party, are great examples of the strong community spirit of the city.*

## HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

*The Housing and Neighborhoods policy chapter contains a number of strategies for improving neighborhood conditions and fostering connected communities of people engaged with making their own neighborhood and the city a fun, attractive, safe, and social place to be. This includes actions addressing the planning priorities raised at the start of the planning process:*

### **Address Widespread Neighborhood Blight**

There are few neighborhoods in the city not impacted to some degree by vacancies and blight. While the pervasiveness of blight appears on the surface to be a negative and daunting condition, in reality there are few areas where blight has completely taken over. What this means is that many neighborhoods can be stabilized with targeted actions to a smaller number of properties. This is much easier than addressing consolidated areas of blight.

### **Foster Residential (re)Investment**

A major contributing factor to the decline of neighborhoods is the lack of investment in residential properties. This is particularly pronounced in rental properties throughout the city where landlords and slumlords do not always reinvest in their properties. Disinvestment is blamed on the relatively low rents. Blight and unsafe conditions in low-income rental units is a serious concern. While recent inspection and enforcement changes will help address some concerns, the plan identifies additional tools and strategies to promote investment and upkeep of properties.

### **Integrate Public Housing Developments With their Larger Neighborhoods and Community**

The historical and current approach to affordable housing development in the city is to develop specific housing developments for affordable housing. Initially begun in the 1960s in the US, this approach has fallen out of favor as the detrimental outcomes of “projects” became clear. Current affordable housing redevelopment best practices have shifted now toward a mixed-income neighborhood approach where affordable units are interspersed among market rate housing. This eliminates challenges that can develop in segregated areas of poverty, such as blight, crime, and general disinvestment.



*The Berkshire Food Project, operated out of the First Congregational Church, has ramped up its programming to meet growing food insecurity in the city, including growing some of their own food in a community garden plot.*

## LOCAL FOOD AND HEALTH

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*The Local Food and Health policy chapter builds on work in northern Berkshire around health and food planning and initiatives and commits the City to new roles as an active partner in community health and wellness. This includes actions addressing the planning priorities raised at the start of the planning process:*

### **Ensure Access to Local Healthy Food**

Poverty rates are high in the city and hunger has increased because of the national economic crisis. Hunger particularly impacts those on limited or fixed incomes including the disabled, elderly, and low-income workers. Some initiatives have arisen to help address food insecurity – including community gardens, feeding sites, and fresh food subsidies – but more is needed to address hunger in the community.

### **Retain Local Health Care Service**

The closing of North Adams Regional Hospital was a real shock to the northern Berkshire community and highlights the immediate and long-term need to retain local health care services in the city. While the pace of change in post-closure negotiations is too quick and variable to capture or react to in this long-range planning document, it does not change the need and priority of retaining right-sized health care services in northern Berkshire. Even before the closure, a number of health care issues and service gaps emerged in stakeholder discussions including what the future of the hospital will look like, a shortage of primary care providers, a need for urgent care clinic as an alternative to an ER visit, critical health challenges like mental health and substance abuse, and responding to growing language needs in health care provision. Any new health care service system in the future will still need to address these needs.

### **Support Healthy, Active Lifestyles**

Obesity and obesity-related illnesses are a primary health challenge facing the community. The obesity epidemic is the result of the culmination of various factors including diet, lifestyle, socio-economic status, culture, and genetics. Between public, private, and non-profit actions, there is a broad range of opportunities and initiatives that can be undertaken to combat obesity. Schools can also play a key role in providing prevention programming on nutrition, alcohol, tobacco, and drug use.





*The Silvio O. Conte Middle School renovation will bring more activity to the downtown while also enacting a forward-thinking practice of having schools located within the community core rather than at the outskirts as was common for schools constructed in the last 50 years. This is “green” in that it brings the school closer to the city’s core neighborhoods and reuses an existing building and grounds.*

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

### Improve Mobility Through Viable Multi-Modal Options

While the city itself has a compact footprint, there are a number of multi-modal system challenges posed by poor street and sidewalk connectivity, narrow roadways, and limited parking space in certain neighborhoods or streets. There are also areas difficult for non-natives to navigate. Pedestrian connections within the downtown and between the downtown and local neighborhoods are a critical component to improving mobility both for those without a car and those who would prefer to walk or bike. Simple amenities like bike racks, benches, signage, and safe sidewalks can go a long way in improving the pedestrian environment. These have the added benefits of increased exercise, reduced energy use and emissions, and making a more lively and interactive community setting.

### Rectify Issues Resulting From Past Deferred Maintenance and Investment in Infrastructure and Services

Over the past several years, the City has been working to proactively inventory and quantify the backlog of capital investment projects which will require significant resources to address. After years of deferred maintenance and “duct tape” solutions rather than true fixes, this price tag is likely significant. However, the City intends to take a methodical and strategic approach to gradually address needs in a fiscally responsible manner.

### Reduce Dependence on Energy from Non-Renewable Sources

The City has taken major strides in the last two years to improve its renewable energy portfolio, including solar PV projects at the high school, airport, and landfill. This will provide immediate and long-term energy savings for the City and school district. In addition, the City is working towards its Green Communities designation which will enable the City to apply annually to a restricted grant pool to fund additional energy efficiency and renewable energy projects.



## LAND USE

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### Comprehensive Update of Zoning Code

The City's zoning code was originally drafted and adopted in 1956. There has been no comprehensive rewrite of zoning ordinances since that time. Modifications to the zoning code have been reactionary in nature – targeted edits to respond to some project-specific need. Over time this has had the cumulative impact of creating internal inconsistencies within the code. It also means that the tools the City has to shape and direct development have not kept pace with changing market trends and best practices. There are many opportunities to improve the code to be more user-friendly for property-owners and developers, such as clear rules, guidance for City officials, and streamlined, clear approval procedures. The plan identifies new tools to be included in a revised zoning ordinance and sets the basis for a comprehensive rewrite of the City's zoning ordinances. In the meantime, development will proceed under the existing code and zoning amendments will continue to be made to address issues as they emerge, in order to ensure projects can continue to move forward.